

Getting the joke: teaching the comedy film

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When AQA announced that the Controlled Test for GCSE Media Studies in 2003 would be 'Comedy Films', many teachers must have wondered who was laughing at who. Comedy is notoriously difficult to teach and I've certainly never attempted it with students 14-16. But the challenge is there, so what can we make of it?

Defining the comedy film

The comedy film genre belongs to the groups of films that are categorised by the emotions they target in audiences:

comedy = laughter, humour
horror = terror, fright
melodrama = pathos etc.

But where the other groupings bring together films with similar narrative structures, comedy films fall into two main sub-groupings:

- the comedian-led film, structured through gags and sketches
- the comedy situation film with a more coherent narrative

These two groups can sometimes overlap and indeed the 'pure' comedy film of any kind is a fairly rare animal. Most so-called comedy films are in reality hybrids, 'comedy hyphenates' such as comedy-horror, comedy-thriller, comedy-musical etc.

'Comedy' is the most important category in cinema, present in every national film culture and dominant in many. But much of the time comedy is enjoyed by audiences as an element across many films rather than as a distinct genre.

In contemporary cinema, critics and theorists have been mostly concerned with defining specific hybrids, which draw on the broader repertoire of 'comedy elements' in easily recognisable ways:

- 'teen comedy' – often set in high school and involving adolescent sexual adventure and conflicts with authority;
- 'romantic comedy' – a popular hybrid, targeted at women and couples, especially in the 25-35 age group;
- 'social comedy' – 'situational comedies' drawing on class conflict and social realism, a feature of British cinema;
- 'gross-out comedy' – a currently successful cycle which may involve any of the above, but pushed more towards outrageous gags.

Theoretical work has focused on particular forms such as 'screwball comedy', the first great cycle of which appeared in the 1930s and 1940s with performers such as Carole Lombard, Barbara Stanwyck and Katherine Hepburn. The subversive nature of this cycle and its structural similarity to horror are just two of its critical attractions.

The 'elements' of comedy

All genre films are constructed using familiar 'narrative devices' such as the chase in an action picture, the gunfight in a western etc. These sequences have become familiar, even defining moments, but only in a few cases have they come to dominate the film.

In a comedy film, audiences respond to two different comedy elements:

- The Gag – visual, aural, verbal jokes, carefully timed and delivered for maximum impact;
- Comic situation – 'narrative comedy' in which it is the developing relationships between characters and the social environment that causes us to laugh.

These two elements make a volatile combination since the performance of gags is often highly disruptive of the progression of the narrative. Geoff King (2002) points to early Marx Bros. films such as *Duck Soup* (US 1933) in which the antics of Chico and Harpo often threaten to derail the narrative altogether. Gag follows gag in an orgasmic rush – all delivered by consummate professional comedians, (who like many others had adapted their

stage routine for the cinema.) In the later Marx Bros. films, the 'story' takes over (often a fairly feeble romance) and the gags are demoted to a sideshow.

In most comedy films there is a tension between the gag and the narrative situation and between the comedian and the comic actor.

Types of comedy

The pedagogic problem with comedy seems to be that it is very difficult to pin down. As well as the tension between the gag and the narrative, there is a further set of categorisations which refer to the purposes of comedy and, linked to this, the status of the comedy form. I've called these 'types' of comedy, but I'm sure there is a better term. Here are four distinct types:

Slapstick is 'visual and vulgar'. It is in one sense primitive and universal, relying on our almost instinctive reaction to characters assailed by danger, pain etc. At the same time it requires great timing and all round performance skills. And in the form of the traditional cinema cartoon it can become a highly sophisticated exploration of human behaviour (think Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote).

Observational comedy is gentler and more subtle and presents everyday life as quirky with unusual behaviour in a realist context.

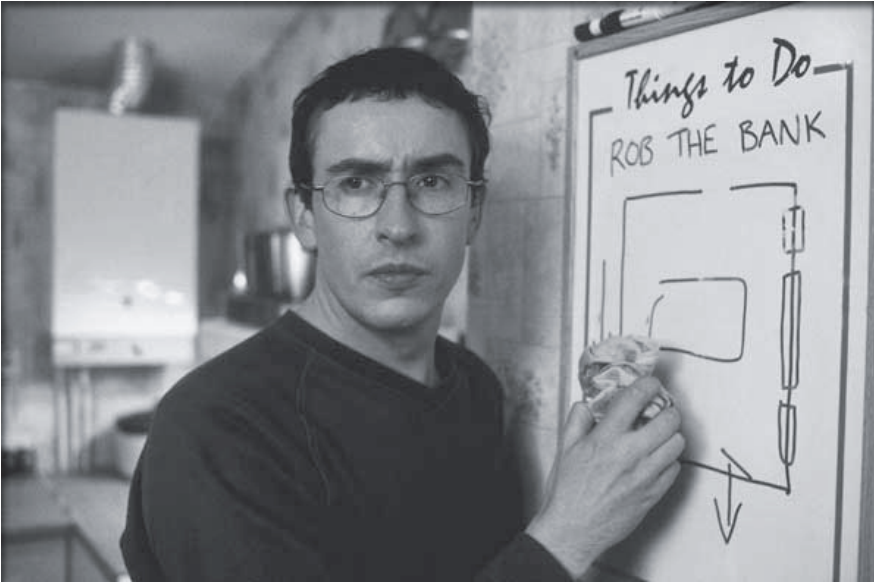
Parody mocks existing forms, requiring audiences to have specific knowledge of media texts, although in its current incarnation as the 'spoof', this knowledge could be limited to what is available on mainstream television.

Satire is comedy used to make political and social commentary. This requires analysis of the whole social context, implying an educated audience.

These different types can be mixed together. (*Monty Python's Life of Brian* arguably displays elements of all the types.)

Working with Key Concepts

From the above, it's clear that 'film comedy' is going to be a slippery form for GCSE students to handle. Approaches



Steve Coogan as the hapless *Parole Officer*.

via the key concepts may give them something to hold on to.

1. Codes and Conventions: Film Language

The secret of comedy is timing and performance. Students could analyse routines, gags etc. and see how they are used within a narrative feature. It would be interesting to compare a visual gag with a classic suspense sequence. Both involve a careful payoff between what we know as the audience and the awareness displayed by the character. Our pleasure comes from the gleeful anticipation of the humiliation of the comic character or our fear for the hero in the suspense thriller – “Don’t open the door!”. A good example of this comes in the opening shot of *The Parole Officer* when Steve Coogan is tipping back a chair which we know will topple over. Just before it does, he cries out “Oh, shit!” Is this funny because we enjoy the fact that he anticipates disaster, but cannot prevent it?

2. Representation

Possibly the most productive approach, analysis of character ‘types’ and situations should open up comedy films for student analysis. Comedy, like drama, depends on conflicts, in particular between weak and strong characters. Much comedy arises from the success of the weak in deflating the powerful. On the other hand, comedy is also a weapon against fear of the unknown or ‘the Other’, so that the basis for comedy becomes racism, sexism etc.

The Parole Officer is useful here too. Steve Coogan plays the gormless hero (latest in a long line from George Formby

via Norman Wisdom), who will win the beautiful woman and defeat the evil villain (played by the actor Stephen Dillane). His ‘helpers’ include a ‘strong but dim’ type, a supercilious clever type and an older Asian man played by Indian star Om Puri. The script quite cleverly laughs at these characters, but also allows them to represent a form of social inclusion, so that although we are invited to laugh at some of Om Puri’s use of language, we also recognise that he is the most practical and sensible character.

The cultural basis for comedy also throws up the contradiction of ‘international comedy’. Early cinema stars such as Chaplin were hugely popular in every territory across the world, but there are now assumptions that comedy doesn’t travel and massively popular films from Germany, Spain, France etc. are rarely released in the UK. Is this just a matter of language differences?

3. Audience

The advantage of comedy to producers is that it appeals across all audience groups. However, there are distinct differences in audiences for certain types of comedy. In the UK these are often class differences and age differences. The distinctions were particularly strong in earlier periods when genre production was still possible in British Cinema – e.g. the 1950s with Norman Wisdom (working class) v. the Doctor series (middle class). Is this still evident in 2002?

Students could perhaps consider tv comics and whether they are more likely to be successful on particular channels (could Graham Norton leave Channel 4 or Dawn French appear on Channel 5?).

Each television channel has a different audience profile, e.g. Channel 4 targets the young and affluent whilst ITV is for older and more working class viewers.

4. Institutions

Comedy films may be quite good for studying institution. Historically, various cycles of films can be traced back to their origins in other forms such as music hall, radio and television and in the last twenty years, from club ‘stand-up’. Currently, Harry Enfield and Steve Coogan are making the shift from TV to cinema. Students might explore the difficulty in moving an act between media. This will be both a formal question and an institutional one. It may also raise the issue of ‘offensive comedy’ – can cinema cope with the most aggressive of stand-up routines? Where has the fashion for ‘gross-out’ come from? How has cinema as an industry responded?

Case Studies

The Parole Officer (UK 2001) and *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (US 1999) are two possible films for GCSE students (both are Cert 12). *American Pie* (US 1999) is a Cert 15, but many GCSE students will have seen it on video. These three films offer a range of comedy types, elements and genres.

In some ways, *The Parole Officer* is a very traditional film, whereas *Austin Powers* strives to be ‘contemporary’ (even though it is supposedly set in the past for much of the narrative). Both are effectively ‘comedian-led’ films, but whereas one depends more on observational comedy and social issues (with gags worked into ‘situations’) the other relies on more extravagantly visual gags used in a spoof. The spoof employed in the *Austin Powers* films is many layered with jokes depending on knowledge that is perhaps unavailable to most younger viewers, who will otherwise be engaged by the effects and visual gags. This may be a way in to discussion of the age profile for comedy.

American Pie speaks directly to a teen audience, offering a hybrid teen comedy/coming of age story, with younger actors (not yet) developed as comedians.

If these contemporary films are used to introduce the possibilities of film comedy, an historical perspective (often required by AQA’s spec) can be pursued by tracing back the individual elements. Steve Coogan could be compared with Norman Wisdom or George Formby or contrasted with Rowan Atkinson in

Bean, and a different trajectory traced back to earlier screen comedians such as Chaplin, Keaton or Laurel and Hardy. A third possibility is to compare Coogan with Peter Sellers. Was he a comedian or a comic actor? Certainly Coogan has followed Sellers in developing a range of different character types. Sellers also provides an 'in' to different types of comedy films such as the satire of *Dr Strangelove* (UK/US 1963).

African American comedians such as Whoopi Goldberg and Eddie Murphy also offer study opportunities for GCSE students.

Situational social comedies can also be contrasted over time. Most of the Ealing comedies of the 1940s and early 1950s will seem twee to modern audiences but the three comedies from

Sandy Mackendrick (*Whisky Galore*, *The Man in the White Suit* and *The Ladykillers*) all stand up to scrutiny. A modern film that has been described as 'Ealingesque' is *Brassed Off*.

Resources

(Definitely not for GCSE students, but useful for definitions and ideas about analysis, as well as information and ideas about individual films).

Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (eds) (1995) *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Routledge (essays on Hollywood comedy from the studio era)

Richard Dacre (1997) 'Traditions of British Comedy' in Robert Murphy (ed) *The British Cinema Book*, BFI (useful short essay on British films up to the 1960s)

Geoff King (2002) *Film Comedy*, Wallflower Press (Just out and the best buy for good ideas about current films)
 Steve Neale (2000) *Genre and Hollywood*, Routledge (short section – 6 pages – on comedy as a major genre)

Notes on *The Ladykillers* and *Brassed Off* plus *Pleasantville* (teen comedy) and *if...* (satire) are available from *itp* (see catalogue on page 23)

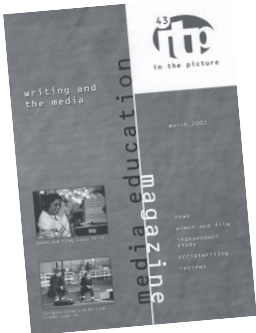
A screening of *The Parole Officer* as part of a day event for students is scheduled for September 24 (repeated November 8) at Pictureville in Bradford. Comedy INSET is scheduled for September 20, contact NMPFT Education on 01274 202040. More materials will be available from *in the picture* publications in the Autumn.

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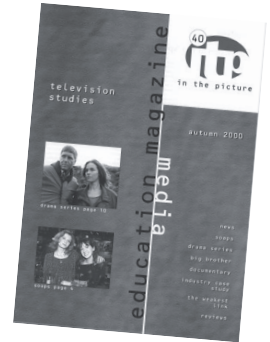


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